The Construction of Museum Ethical Narratives in Leila Aboulela's Short Story *The Museum*: A Postcolonial and Cultural Memory Perspective

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Abstract: This study analyzes Leila Aboulela's *The Museum*, centering on a museum visit of Sudanese student Shadia and Scottish peer Bryan, to explore ethical narratives and colonial reflections. Set amid Scotland's 1990s devolution, the museum—ostensibly an ethical contact zone—perpetuates colonial myths. Through ethical literary criticism and post-colonial theory, it examines the disjunction between museum ethics and colonial practice, Shadia-Bryan's cognitive split over colonial memory, and Shadia's awakening from identity anxiety to cultural resistance, culminating in their breakup. It posits that the narrative underscores the urgency of museum decolonization, thereby contributing to the enrichment of research in the fields of post-colonial literature and museum ethics.

Keywords: *The Museum*; museum ethics; colonial memory; museum decolonization

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1. Introduction

Leila Aboulela, of Sudanese-Egyptian descent, emerged as a vital voice in exploring post-colonial tensions through her literary works, whose literary contributions have been formally recognized by prominent academic and literary institutions: she was awarded the Scottish Book Awards in 2011, the Saltire Fiction Book of the Year Award in 2018, and the PEN Pinter Prize in 2025. These accolades not only attest to the artistic merit of her writing but also underscore its significance within global literary discourse—particularly in shaping critical conversations about post-colonial African and Arab diasporic experiences. Such recognition positions her as a key figure for scholars investigating the intersection of literature, post-colonial theory, and transnational identity formation.

Aboulela's literary trajectory was profoundly shaped by her migration from Sudan to Scotland in 1992. As she articulated, "The trauma of that move was the catalyst that launched my journey as a writer... someone who was marginalized due to race and religion" (Parssinen, 2020: par. 3)—this lived experience emerged as a catalyst for her sustained exploration of cross-cultural rifts and colonial legacies. These themes occupy a central position in her 1999 short story "*The Museum*," which subsequently garnered the 2000 Caine Prize for African Writing.

The Museum focuses on Shadia, a 25-year-old Sudanese student studying in Aberdeen, and her interaction with Bryan, a Scottish peer—their communication comes to a standstill during a visit to a local museum that exhibits African artifacts. This museum encounter is not merely a narrative device; instead, it functions as the story's core analytical lens to examine the role of museums in a society shaped by colonial history.

2. The Ethical Turn in Museums: The Historical Context of *The Museum*

Over the final three decades of the 20th century, the global museum community underwent a pivotal ethical turn—a paradigmatic shift that reconceptualized museums' societal roles beyond mere custodianship of cultural artifacts. To formalize this shift, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) articulated explicit ethical imperatives in its *Code of Ethics for Museums*, stipulating that museums shall "serve society and its development" while bearing the responsibility of "promoting cultural diversity, disseminating historical truth, and advancing social justice" (ICOM, 2013: 4. 2). This normative realignment did not emerge in a vacuum; rather, it originated from critical retrospection on museums' complicity in colonial governance. During the colonial era, many institutions styled themselves as "universal museums," integrating cultural relics plundered from colonized territories into a Eurocentric narrative of "human civilization." In practice, however, such museums operated as "hegemonic mechanisms for consolidating colonial knowledge and existence" (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018: 199)—institutions that naturalized imperial dominance by framing colonized cultures as either "primitive" precursors to European modernity or exotic curiosities.

Postcolonial scholars Sarr and Savoy further underscored this complicity by arguing that "the acquisition of cultural objects during the colonial period and their transfer to European metropolises was by no means a marginal activity of the colonial enterprise, but its very core" (Sarr & Savoy, 2018: 13). Their assertion is critical to contextualizing the ethical turn: it reveals that museums were not passive bystanders to colonialism but active agents in its project of resource extraction and epistemic control. By centering this critique, the global museum community's ethical reorientation can be understood not as a voluntary "reform" but as a necessary reckoning with the sector's colonial legacy.

Against this broader global backdrop, an ideal post-ethical-turn museum ought to function as a "contact zone" (Clifford, 1997: 192)—a dynamic space for intercultural dialogue and negotiated interpretations of historical memory, rather than a monologic platform for reinforcing colonial-era narratives. This reimagining of the museum as a "contact zone" is reinforced by Australian scholar Hooper-Greenhill's research, which challenges the long-standing assumption that museum audiences constitute an "undifferentiated group." Instead, Hooper-Greenhill emphasizes that audiences are "active meaning-makers shaped by their own histories" (Hooper-Greenhill, 2006: 362)—a claim that implies museums must cede unilateral interpretive authority and prioritize

the perspectives of historically marginalized groups, particularly communities descended from colonized populations. For these communities, museum exhibits about colonial history are not abstract "cultural displays" but sites of personal and collective identity; ignoring their voices thus perpetuates the very epistemic injustice the ethical turn seeks to redress.

Notably, the 1999 publication of *The Museum* intersects with a pivotal juncture in Scottish national history: the 1997 referendum on devolution (which approved the establishment of a Scottish Parliament) and the subsequent inauguration of the Scottish Parliament in 1999. This "devolution moment" catalyzed a urgent collective project to reshape Scotland's national identity—one that sought to distance Scottish identity from its historical entanglement with British imperial governance while foregrounding distinct Scottish cultural and political narratives (Brown, 2022: 220). This contextual specificity deepens the novel's engagement with colonial reflections: Scotland's own negotiation of its role as both a "peripheral" nation within the UK and a participant in British colonialism provides a unique lens through which to examine postcolonial memory. Aboulela, drawing on her personal experiences of marginalization as a Sudanese-British writer in Scotland, leverages Shadia's perspective to illuminate two interconnected dynamics in postcolonial Scottish society: residual racial tensions stemming from Scotland's colonial past, and the fragmentation of colonial memory (as different groups contest whether Scotland should be framed as a "victim" of British dominance or a "collaborator" in imperial projects). By centering the museum visit as the narrative's focal point, Aboulela transforms a seemingly mundane cultural practice into a microcosm for broader debates about ethical accountability, colonial redress, and the politics of memory—thus aligning the novel with the global museum community's ethical turn while grounding its critique in Scotland's specific historical context.

3. Deconstructing Colonial Symbols in Exhibits: The Narrative of Violence from Wax Figures to Guns

The African-themed Scottish museum portrayed in *The Museum* stands in contradistinction to the ethical ideals delineated above.

As dictated by the exhibition's curatorial design, "the first thing they see" as visitors within the museum is positioned to be the central exhibit: a wax figure depicting a 19th-century Scottish male. This curatorial choice, intentional in its framing of visitors' initial perceptual experience, epitomizes the entrenchment of colonial narratives in the museum's knowledge-production process. The wax figure depicts "a Scottish man from Victorian times. He sat on a chair surrounded with possessions from Africa, overflowing trunks, an ancient map strewn on the floor of the glass cabinet" (Aboulela, 2019: 25–26)[1]. By constructing this scene of "[a] hero who had gone away and come back, laden, ready to report" (26), the curatorial team frames Scottish colonizers as explorers who retrieved the "fruits of civilization." Concurrently, this curatorial representation intentionally obscures the plunderous essence inherent to these so-called "possessions." Obviously, the wax figure is the core symbol of the myth of colonial heroes. Curators construct this myth through three layers: first, the wax figure

[1] All original text excerpts included in this dissertation are drawn from Aboulela, Leila (2019). "*The Museum.*" In *Twenty Years of The Caine Prize for African Writing*. Oxford: New Internationalist Publications Ltd. pp. 13–29. Only the page numbers are marked below.

shapes the colonizers' confidence and bravery; second, the surrounding piles of "possessions from Africa" (25) beautify colonial plunder as the collection of civilized achievements; finally, the isolation of glass cabinets and the focus of lighting endow the wax figure with sacredness, making it the object of audience admiration.

However, Shadia instinctively exhibits a "turning away" behavior, as she perceives "an ugliness in the lifelike wispiness of his hair, his determined expression, the way he sat" (26)—this "ugliness" essentially reflects her sense of unease toward the aestheticized representation of colonial violence. By contrast, the description that "Bryan began to conscientiously study every display cabinet, read theposters on the wall" (26) indicates his uncritical acceptance of the colonial narrative, which in turn reveals the role of museum education in obscuring colonial history.

Actually, this colonialism myth cannot withstand scrutiny. From a historical context, the activities of Scots in Africa during the 18th and 19th centuries were mostly related to the slave trade and resource plunder. Scottish merchants once established slave strongholds in West Africa, selling a large number of Africans to the Americas; Scottish explorers' "expeditions" in Africa also mostly served British colonial expansion (Schoene, 2007: 2). The "property" around the wax figures is actually the spoils of these violent acts. Kennedy pointed out: "Museums displaying property plundered from others—whether bound in chains, caged, or made into statues—are essentially a display of imperial superiority" (304). The heroic image of the wax figures is precisely the aesthetic presentation of this sense of superiority.

Shadia's disgust with the wax figures stems from her clear understanding of colonial history. What she sees in the "the lifelike wispiness of his hair" (26) of the wax figures is not the elegance of a civilization envoy but the coldness of a perpetrator. This perception makes her refuse to be an accomplice in the colonial narrative—her action of "turning away" (26) is both a physical avoidance and an ethical rejection.

The "ancient map strewn on the floor of the glass cabinet" (26) next to the wax figure is another important colonial symbol. Although this map is not clearly marked, combined with the historical background, it is likely a map of Africa's partition after the 1885 Berlin Conference—European powers, ignoring African tribal and cultural boundaries, forcibly divided colonies, laying the foundation for the borders of modern African countries. This paper partition is a typical form of colonial violence—it disassembles Africa from an organic cultural whole into the spheres of influence of European powers.

The museum's exhibition of the map intentionally downplays its colonial attributes. Lacking annotations regarding the historical context of the partition, i. e., the partitioning of Africa during the late 19th-century "Scramble for Africa," primarily formalized at the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885, and explanations of the partition's impacts on African societies, the map is prone to leading audiences to perceive it as a product of geographical exploration rather than a reflection of colonial territorial division. This approach is in line with the map politics of the colonial period—The museum is composed of objects that are dislocated from their original provenance and detached from their organic context—leaving those environments impoverished—and "musealized" in glass cases, staged to be viewed within a tableau of new meanings (Lowe, 2016: 419).

Shadia's disregard for the map implies resistance to this spatial conquest. Unlike Bryan, who "began to readthe posters on the wall" (25), she turns her gaze to what she has thought might be items which "belonged to her life at home, what she missed"—she longs to see in the museum "sunlight and photographs of the Nile, something to appease her homesickness, a comfort, a message" (27). These longings are essentially a pursuit of

Africa's autonomous space, refusing to be defined by European maps.

To further illustrate this point, consider the textual representation of colonial history in a museum poster, which states:

> During the 18th and 19th centuries, northeast Scotland made a disproportionate impact on the world at large by contributing so many skilled and committed individuals … In serving an empire they gave and received, changed others and were themselves changed and often returned home with tangible reminders of their experiences. (26)

A critical analysis of this passage reveals its deliberate framing of colonial activities as a form of reciprocal cultural communication—a narrative that emphasizes mutual "giving and receiving" while strategically eliding the violent, extractive core of colonial "taking." This rhetorical omission functions to sanitize the exploitative nature of colonialism by reducing its complexity to a benign, two-way interaction. Such a sanitized narrative is directly challenged, however, by Shadia's subjective response to the museum's exhibits, as documented in the same textual context: "Her eyes skimmed over the disconnected objects out of place and time. Iron and copper, little statues. Nothing was of her, nothing belonged to her life at home, what she missed" (26).

Shadia's perceptual framing of the museum's artifacts—framed not as "tangible reminders of 'colonial' experiences" (as the poster claims) but as alienated objects divorced from her own cultural and personal history—undermines the poster's narrative of reciprocal exchange. For Shadia, these artifacts are not evidence of mutual cultural interaction; instead, they operate as material traces of colonial plunder—objects extracted from their original cultural contexts through coercive colonial mechanisms, rather than shared through voluntary or equitable exchange. This contrast between the museum's institutional narrative and Shadia's individual interpretation highlights how dominant colonial discourses often rely on selective storytelling to obscure violence, while marginalized perspectives can expose the material and ideological contradictions of such narratives.

The "row of guns" exhibited on the second floor of the exhibition hall constitutes the most direct material evidence of colonial violence, which further intensify the conflict. When Shadia sees "a row of guns aimed at her," she feels the presence of colonial violence: "Scottish arms of centuries ago, gunfire in the service of the empire. Silver muzzles, a dirty grey now" (28). Museums that exhibit cultural relics plundered during wars are analogous to the resounding of gunfire once more for the victimized groups; this is all the truer when considering the firearms that facilitated the plundering of such cultural relics.

These "Scottish arms" (28) were once deployed to suppress African resistance movements and sustain the operation of the slave trade system, functioning as core instruments of violent domination under European colonial rule. While the museum presents these arms as historical relics, it omits the elaboration on their specific application scenarios and the groups of victims affected. This practice essentially results in the decontextualization of colonial violence—transforming tools of brutality into objects of historical display and effacing their inherent bloody historical connotations.

These firearms serve as tangible witnesses to the process of colonial brutalization. Beyond their role as implements of physical violence, they also embody symbolic significance of psychological violence: by leveraging the deterrent force of guns, colonizers inculcated a sense of fear in the minds of the colonized

population, thereby facilitating the establishment of long-term colonial control.

Shadia's fear of guns precisely represents the intergenerational continuation of such psychological violence. As described, "She shivered in spite of the wool she was wearing, layers of clothes" (28), and she further equated this physical and psychological sensation to the coldness associated with hell: "Hell is not only blazing fire, a part of it is freezing cold, torturous ice and snow. In Scotland's winter you live a glimpse of this unseen world, feel the breath of it in your bones" (28). This emotional experience reveals the long-lasting and persistent nature of colonial violence—even after the formal termination of colonial rule, the memory of violence remains embedded in the bodily experiences and collective consciousness of the formerly colonized groups. Shadia's fear is precisely the physical reaction to this memory of violence.

4. Shadia's Ethical Awakening: From Identity Anxiety to Cultural Resistance

Ethical literary criticism holds that the value of literary works lies not only in aesthetics but also in "revealing the ethical order and ethical conflicts in specific historical contexts through the ethical choices of characters" (Nie, 2023: 31). In *The Museum*, each of Shadia's choices—from borrowing notes from Bryan, to rejecting the museum's colonial narrative, and then to breaking off with Bryan—reflects the ethical dilemmas of post-colonial immigrants: How to integrate into mainstream society while maintaining cultural identity? How to face the legacy of colonial history?

Shadia's multiple ethical identities amplify the complexity of this dilemma. She embodies three interrelated social roles: first, a Sudanese international student matriculated at the University of Aberdeen; second, the daughter of a mother who claims ancestry from an elite lineage, as substantiated by the statement that "my mother comes from a very big family. A ruling family. If you British hadn't colonised us, my mother would have been a princess now" (22); third, a "betrothed woman" whose fiancé, Fareed, is from an affluent family. Underpinning these identities are distinct ethical expectations: her mother expressed a strong desire for her to pursue academic studies, obtain a postgraduate degree in Britain, and embark on a career subsequent to marriage, noting, "This way, you will have your in-laws' respect. They have money but you will have a degree. Don't end up like me. I left my education to marry your father and now … " (17); Fareed positions himself as "very broad-minded to allow [her] to study abroad," adding that "Other men would not have put up with this … " (17); meanwhile, Scottish society classifies her as part of the "collection of the Third World" (14).

At the beginning of the story, as a Sudanese international student at the University of Aberdeen, Shadia even has anxiety about her hair, which is a concentrated manifestation of her identity anxiety. "She had longed for such straight hair" (13), even fantasizing that "When she went to Paradise she would have hair like that. When she ran it would fly behind her, if she bent her head down it would fall over like silk and sweep the flowers on the grass" (13). This desire stems from the Western society's admiration for white aesthetics—in the Western context, straight hair is often associated with "civilization and elegance," while curly hair is regarded as "primitive and rough" (White & White, 1998: 171).

Shadia's hair anxiety is essentially a manifestation of internalized racism. To integrate into Scottish society, she tries to different means to deal with her hair.

> Her hair depressed her. The damp weather made it frizz up after she straightened it with hot tongs. So she had given up and now wore it in a bun all the time, tightly pulled back away from her face, the curls held down by pins and Vaseline Tonic. She didn't like this style, her corrugated hair, and in the mirror her eyes looked too large. The mirror in the public bathroom, at the end of the corridor to her room, had printed on it "This is the face of someone with HIV". (16)

This self-denial is the result of colonial cultural hegemony—Western culture, through aesthetic standards, makes the colonized groups generate self-hatred. Scholar Fanon pointed out in "Black Skin, White Masks": "Skin color will bring profound inferiority to blacks, forcing them to accept the ethical identity constructed by racism and identify with white values" (Fanon, 1952: 17). Shadia's hair anxiety is a vivid example of this theory. Her desire for straight hair is not only a pursuit of beauty but also a yearning for white identity, trying to escape the label of the other by changing her appearance.

However, after entering the museum, Shadia's identity anxiety gradually turns into cultural resistance. Within the museum setting, the conflict among these identities culminates: in her capacity as a Sudanese individual, she resists the colonial narrative; in her role as an international student, she is required to engage with Western perspectives; and in her identity as a woman, she confronts the tension between emotional inclinations and rational judgment. Museums construct an authorized heritage discourse through exhibits, labels, and spaces, while literary narratives deconstruct this authority through the subjective experiences of characters.

In *The Museum*, the author repeatedly juxtaposes the ostensibly "objective" exhibition labels of the museum with Shadia's "subjective" emotional responses, thereby revealing the constructed nature and inaccuracy of the museum's dominant narrative. This awakening begins with her disgust for the wax figures—she sees the falseness of the colonial narrative in the heroic image of the wax figures; then, through interpreting exhibits such as posters and letters, she further recognizes the colonial nature of the museum.

When Bryan articulates his identification with colonial explorers, stating, "I know why they went away [...] I understand why they travelled. [...] They had to get away, to leave here ... " (27), this sense of identification originates primarily from his museum visit, and more fundamentally, from the colonial education he has been exposed to since childhood. Specifically, British history textbooks, as noted by Procter, "focus on the Tudor and Victorian eras but avoid talking about colonial aggression, wars, and imperial rise in between" (Procter, 2018: par. 2)—a curricular bias that leads Bryan to perceive colonizers as heroes escaping mediocre lives, rather than as perpetrators of violence. In response, Shadia challenges Bryan's perspective, arguing, "They went to benefit themselves [...] people go away because they benefit in some way ... " (28). This challenge directly reveals the essence of colonial behavior: colonialism is not a so-called "civilizing mission," but rather an act of plunder driven by interest.

Shadia's awakening is reflected in her reaffirmation of African identity. She no longer longs to be white but takes the initiative to defend Africa: "We have things like computers and cars. We have 7Up in Africa and some people, a few people, have bathrooms with golden taps ... " (29). She sounds absolutely distraught so that she mentions golden tap, because what she here intends to refer to is the golden toilet seat which Fareed harangues her into buying in Aberdeen. Shadia's slip of the tongue may result from her lack of "faculties of mind and

resources of language that are suited to the expression of that complexity" (Adamson, et al., 1999: 231). In fact, such objects she mentions above are supposed to fight against "stereotypes about pre-modern Africa that are steeped in tribal objects" (Cooper, 2013: 260). Shadia's outcry is really an impassionate plea for museums to talk more about people, including the makers, users and appreciators of these objects.

Shadia's awakening is also reflected in her perception of ethical responsibility. As a Sudanese, she believes she has a responsibility to expose the truth of colonial history; as an international student, she refuses to accept the single Western narrative; as a woman, she resists the oppression of race. This awareness of ethical responsibility transforms her from a passive victim to an active resistor, and finally chooses to break up with Bryan, sticking to her cultural identity.

In the closing, Bryan's commitment to driving change—articulated via "Museums change. I can change" (29)—though seemingly genuine, overlooks the inherent complexity of colonial historical contexts. Decolonizing museums requires not just adjusting artifact exhibitions but reconstructing historical narratives; similarly, individual transformation demands more than an attitude shift, needing reshaped cognitive frameworks. Notably, neither process is short-term. Shadia recognizes this dilemma: she "know[s] it was a steep path she had no strength for" (29) and understands the vast gaps between them— "Many things, years and landscapes, gulfs" (29).

This dilemma epitomizes a core predicament in postcolonial cultural dialogue: trauma stemming from colonial history undermines the trust of colonized groups in colonizers, whereas cognitive biases engendered by colonial education impede colonizers from attaining a genuine comprehension of the suffering of the colonized. As Mbembe notes, "Cultural dialogue in postcolonial society is always shrouded in the shadow of colonial memory, making it difficult to achieve true equality and understanding" (Mbembe, 2001: 4).

5. Ethical Examination of Colonialism: From Historical Violence to Contemporary Impacts

For an extended period, Scotland's role in colonial history has frequently been overshadowed by the grand narrative of the British Empire. Scots have predominantly positioned themselves as colonial victims, while disregarding Scotland's active involvement in colonial expansion. In reality, Scotland assumed a significant role in the slave trade, colonial exploration, and resource plunder: Scottish merchants exercised control over parts of the slave trade outposts in West Africa, and Scottish explorers furnished crucial intelligence for the British colonization of Africa. Nevertheless, Scottish society has long sustained a state of colonial amnesia. This amnesia functions both to evade historical responsibility and to construct a national identity rooted in Scottish exceptionalism—portraying Scotland as an anti-colonial, peace-loving nation in contrast to aggressive England.

In *The Museum*, the museum itself serves as an exact material carrier of such colonial amnesia. It portrays Scottish colonizers as messengers of civilization, while deliberately omitting any reference to their colonial violence; concurrently, it represents Africa as a primitive region, yet disregards the material and interests Scotland acquired through colonization. This kind of narrative is, in essence, a continuation of Scotland's colonial amnesia, which constructs a false national identity by means of historical glorification.

The influence of cultural hegemony is more insidious. Western culture, through channels such as education,

media, and museums, implants Western superiority into the cognition of global audiences—portraying the West as representative of civilization and modernity and the non-West as symbols of primitiveness and backwardness. The museum in *The Museum* is precisely an important site of this cultural hegemony—imposing Western perspectives on audiences through the selection of exhibits, the writing of labels, and spatial design, making them accept colonial narratives.

Hall notes: "The cultural hegemony of post-colonial societies is essentially a continuation of colonial discourse. The West continues to maintain dominance over the non-West by controlling cultural production and dissemination" (Hall, 1999: 3). Shadia's anxiety about her hair and Bryan's acceptance of colonial narratives are both results of this cultural hegemony—the former stemming from self-negation due to Western aesthetic standards, the latter from cognitive biases caused by Western historical education.

From an ethical perspective, colonialism constitutes a serious violation of human justice. It deprived colonized groups of their land, resources, and cultural rights, causing enormous casualties and cultural losses; at the same time, it distorted the ethical concepts of colonizers, making them view violence and exploitation as legitimate. As Césaire stated:

> [C] olonization, I repeat, dehumanize even the most civilized man; that colonial activity, colonial enterprise, colonial conquest, which is based on contempt for the native and justified by that contempt, inevitably tends to change him who undertakes it; that the colonizer, who in order to ease his conscience gets into the habit of seeing the other man as an animal accustoms himself to treating him like an animal, and tends objectively to transform himself into an animal. (Césaire, 1972: 41)

Facing colonial history, contemporary society should assume ethical responsibility. This responsibility first manifests in acknowledging historical truth—confronting the essence of colonial violence and refusing to glorify or forget history; second, in promoting cultural justice—returning cultural relics plundered during the colonial period and reconstructing diverse historical narratives; finally, in advancing social equality—eliminating racial discrimination and safeguarding the cultural rights of colonized groups.

6. Conclusion

In *The Museum*, via Shadia and Bryan's museum visit, a profound analytical framework for colonial reflection and ethical critique is constructed. Adopting a "microcosm-to-macrocosm" approach, the narrative engages with post-colonial racial tensions, fragmented colonial memory, and the predicaments of cultural dialogue through an ordinary museum excursion. By symbolically deconstructing exhibits such as wax figures, maps, and firearms, Aboulela unveils the ideological falsity embedded in the museum's colonial narrative; through Shadia's ethical awakening, she materializes the resistance of colonized communities; and through Scotland's manifestation of colonial amnesia, she offers a critique of the contemporary evasion of colonial historical responsibility. This aligns with a core value of post-colonial literature, namely to "awaken the public's colonial memory and promote social reflection on colonial history" (Eze, 2016: 192), thereby furnishing ideological momentum for decolonization movements in real-world contexts.

The Museum serves as a pivotal case for scholarly inquiries into museum ethics and post-colonial literary studies. It identifies the museum as a carrier of colonial discourse, while simultaneously illustrating literature's distinctive function in deconstructing colonial narratives and reawakening colonial memory. This aligns with Petersen's argument that "post-colonial literature, through the subjective experiences of its characters, can more acutely capture the historical trauma of colonialism and facilitate public reflection on the decolonization of museums" (Petersen, 2014: 135).

The decolonization of museums is confronted with enduring challenges, encompassing legal obstacles to the repatriation of cultural relics, path dependence on colonial narratives, and biases in public perception, all of which demand long-term endeavors. As Mignolo argues, "Museums can play a key role in building a decolonized future, but this requires joint efforts from the museum community, academia, and politics—more importantly, the public's clear understanding of colonial history" (Mignolo, 2009: 49). In this regard, Aboulela's short story *The Museum* contributes explicitly by utilizing literary means to galvanize such efforts: it prompts recognition that colonial trauma persists, the process of decolonization remains protracted, and only the sustained pursuit of justice and truth can realize genuine cultural equality and social justice.

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